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ABSTRACT

It is an understatement to assert that American basal reading programs have come under considerable scrutiny. One of the central criticisms of these programs is that they result in the deskilling of teachers (relinquishing control over the goals, methods, materials, and evaluation of reading instruction to the basal reading materials). A critical analysis of the deskilling hypothesis, however, suggests that there may be seams in its logic and insufficient data to support it. Three questions form the structure for such an analysis: (1) Do the empirical data provide evidence of teacher deskilling? (2) Are examples from basal materials and the descriptions of their development which are used to argue for how they deskill teachers representative of current material or publishing practices? and (3) Is there a possible contradiction in the deskilling hypothesis, and might it not fall prey to its own argument? There have been and remain conceptual and pedagogical limitations in basal reading materials; they never have been nor will they become the best or only way to assist teachers in developing students' literacy abilities. Teachers, however, are independent, thoughtful persons quite capable of making professional judgments about their workplace and the nature of their work, basal readers included. (RS)

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Basal Reading Programs and the Deskilling of Teachers: A Critical Examination of the Argument

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting

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Basal Reading Programs and the Deskilling of Teachers: A Critical Examination of the Argument

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In this paper, I will examine the hypothesis that the use of basal reading programs in American elementary classrooms results in the deskilling of teachers. After providing background information and stating the deskilling argument, I will scrutinize it by posing three questions related to it. I will conclude from my responses to these questions that the simple cause/effect relationship suggested by the deskilling argument is an oversimplification and fails to credit teachers with the intelligence and decision-making capabilities they possess.

At the onset, I will be explicit about my point of view. I am a coauthor of a basal reading program. I accepted the opportunity to serve in this capacity several years ago well aware of the intense criticisms of basal materials and those who develop them. My decision to associate myself with a basal publisher was based upon the belief that such materials can be useful literacy acquisition tools for teachers and children and that, through my efforts and that of other literacy educators (Winograd, 1989), those materials could be improved.

Given my orientation, one might choose to dismiss my comments as being reactionary, and I suppose they are in the sense that I am responding to critics who have directly or indirectly suggested that through my involvement with a basal publisher, I restrict or control teachers' teaching and students' learning of literacy abilities. In the Preface to the Report Card on Basal Readers (1988), a work highly critical of editors, authors, consultants, and publishers of basal reading programs, Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, and Murphy state: "While we have tried to be fair in this report we have not tried to be neutral" (p. v). Though I disagree with much of what they say in the Report Card, I know Goodman et al. to be committed educators with high integrity and hence accept their stance of nonneutral fairness. I take a similar stance in this paper and request similar consideration

Background

It is understatement tc assert that American basal reading programs have come under considerable scrutiny recently. Entire issues of professional journals (Hoffman & Roser, 1987; Shannon & Goodman, 1989), articles in professional newspapers ("Point/Counterpoint," 1989), and whole volumes (Goodman et al., 1988) have been devoted to basal readers. Often the rhetoric has been strong and uncomplimentary of basal programs, coming from sources such as whole language advocates (Goodman, 1986a, 1986b, 1988; Harste, 1989), teachers (D. Goodman, 1989; Peterson, 1989),

critical theorists (Shannon, 1989a, 1989b), and professional organizations (National Council of Teachers of English, 1988).

For instance, in a document prepared by the Commission on Reading of the National Council of Teachers of English titled "Basal Readers and the State of American Reading Instruction: A Call for Action" (NCTE, 1988), one reads that "For many if not most children, the typical basal reading series may actually make learning to read more difficult than it needs to be" (p. 1). It is further asserted in this document that basal reading programs are founded on various misconceptions about learning which lead to the following:

> The result of such misconceptions about learning and such rigid control of teacher and student activities is to discourage both teachers and students from thinking, and particularly to discourage students from developing and exercising critical literacy and thinking skills needed to participate fully in a technologically advanced society. (p. 1)

Along with these expressed concerns, critics of basal readers have made various recommendations about them. These range from asking that local administrators allow and encourage teachers to use alternatives to basal readers and that policy makers change laws and regulations that favor or require the use of basals (NCTE, 1988) to the call for their abolition: "We need to get rid of them. Their absence in classrooms is important" (Harste, 1989, p. 270). Among the more extreme viewpoints are K. Goodman's (1989) suggestion that "it may well be the teachers who bring about the revolution that overthrows the basal dominance" (p. 306) and Shannon's (1989a) call for a "movement that I hope will eventually lead to the defeat of the rationalization of reading programs in American schools" (p. 147), which he sees as being embodied in basal reading programs.

The Deskilling Argument

One of the central criticisms of basal reading programs is that they result in the deskilling of teachers, a concept popularized by Michael Apple in Education and Power (1982) and discussed again in Teachers and Texts (Apple, 1986). Drawing from analyses of labor processes, in particular, Braverman's (1974) historical examination of corporate procedures for enhancing management's control of the production process, Apple argues that teachers become deskilled as do workers in industry:

> The skills employees have developed over many years on the job are broken down into atomistic units, redefined, and then appropriated by management to enhance both efficiency and control of the labor process. In the process, workers' control over timing, over defining appropriate ways to do a task, and over criteria that establish acceptable performance are all slowly taken on as the prerogatives of

> management personnel who are usually divorced from the actual place in which the work is carried out. Deskilling, then, often leads to the atrophy of valuable skills that workers possessed, since there is no longer any "need" for them in the redefined labor process. (Apple, 1986, p. 209)

Translating this model to the educational workplace, Apple (1982) argues that the use of "prepackaged sets of curricular materials" (p. 143) in science, social studies, mathematics, and reading leads to a similar deskilling of teachers:

> Skills that teachers used to need, that were deemed essential to the craft of working with children--such as curriculum deliberation and planning, designing teaching and curricular strategies for specific groups and individuals based on intimate knowledge of these people--are no longer as necessary. With the large-scale influx of prepackaged material, planning is separated from execution. The planning is done at the level of the production of both the rules for use of the material and the material itself. The execution is carried out by the teacher. In the process, what were previously considered valuable skills slowly atrophy because they are less often required. (Apple, 1982, p. 146)

Shannon has taken this notion of deskilling and applied it directly to basal reading materials. According to Shannon (1987, 1989a, 1990a), the deskilling of teachers of reading through basal materials occurs as follows:

♦ Teachers reify reading instruction as basal readers; that is, they regard an abstraction (teaching reading) as a concrete object (basal readers). Hence, teachers believe that the materials themselves can teach students to read.

♦ This occurs because teachers view reading materials as "scientific" reading instruction, that is, a technological solution to their responsibility to teach children to read. And by failing to recognize that science is conducted by humans (i.e., authors and editors of basal programs), teachers view the technology (i.e, basal readers) as the science of reading instruction.

♦ As a result, teachers conceive of the teaching and learning of reading as the administration of basal programs which, Shannon maintains:

> emphasize decoding over comprehension, divide literacy into discrete skill components, and provide stories written to be easily decoded and not to offend any interest groups rather than to engage students enthusiastically in the process. Furthermore, basals reduce consideration of text to the reproduction of explicit content through a series of

> specified questions and prescribed answers. (Shannon, 1989a, p. 111).

♦ Thus, teachers are deskilled because they relinquish control over the goals, methods, materials, and evaluation of reading instruction to the basal reading materials.

♦ Further, deskilling "is accompanied by the reskilling of teachers to manage students' progress through the material. This managerial role reduces both the quality and quantity of the skills needed to conduct lessons" (Shannon, 1990a , p. 153).

♦ Thus, Shannon argues, that deskilling is the result of the use of basal readers: "The rise of the reading expert and publishers through the requirement of guidebook-directed instruction deskilled teachers in terms of their ability to offer thoughtful reading instruction independently" (1989a, p. 81). The consequences of this deskilling and reskilling are as follows:

> Virtually no one, including the teacher, is offered a literacy which asks readers to go beyond the word and literal translation of text to tackle the sense, feeling, truth, and intention of an author through the words he or she used in a text. Moreover, no one is asked to develop his or her ability to express understanding of a text--what it does and might mean in one's life. In short, no one is asked to be truly literate by any criterion beyond a standardized test. (Shannon, 1989a, p. 111)

A Critical Analysis

A critical analysis of the deskilling hypothesis, however, suggests that there may be seams in its logic and insufficient data to support it. I structure this analysis by posing and responding to three questions about the deskilling argument:

1. Do the empirical data provide evidence of teacher deskilling? Critical educators like Apple (1982, 1986) have used historical and philosophical methods to argue that a parallel exists between the deskilling of laborers in industry and the deskilling of teachers in schools. Though such arguments have intuitive appeal, there is limited empirical support for the deskilling hypothesis. Shannon bases much of his argument that basal reading materials deskill teachers on his 1983 study of one school district in Minnesota. As part of this investigation, he posited that "Teachers believe that commercial materials can teach a student to read" (p. 72), an assertion central to the reification and deskilling arguments. To test the materials-can-teach hypothesis, 445 teachers responded to five forced-choice items such as "Basal workbooks and worksheets are necessary reading instruction" and "The materials that make up the basal program are the most important part of my reading instruction" (p. 74). Teachers responded to these items according a Likert-type scale, with 5 representing strong agreement with a

statement, 3 moderate agreement, and 1 strong disagreement. Shannon interpreted an overall mean score of 3.65 to the five items as suggestive "that most teachers thought the materials could teach reading" (p. 82).*

A follow-up open-ended question asked teachers "Why do you use these materials?" to which it was judged that 110 of the 445 teachers' responses (25%) were consistent with the materials-can-teach-reading hypothesis. For example, the following teacher statement was counted as support for the materials-can-teach hypothesis: "I use workbooks to teach a student a skill and to check that skill. Readers are interesting and at the reading level" (p. 85).

Do these data support the hypothesis that basal readers deskill teachers? For instance, does moderate agreement (M = 3.16) with a statement such as "Materials that can teach a student to read are called instructional materials" (another of the five forced-choice items, Shannon, 1983, p. 74) mean that teachers have reified reading instruction as the materials and that they have relinquished control for teaching to them? Perhaps, perhaps not. It would be interesting to find out how teachers would respond were they asked directly if basal materials themselves teach students to read or if the were asked if basal programs restrict their freedom to make decisions about their classroom reading programs.

Shannon (1983) argues that his data are generalizable to other school systems: "A comparison of teachers' behaviors across school districts would yield redundant information since researchers have already found that 90% of all elementary teachers use commercial materials during 90% of their instruction (EPIE, 1977)" (1983, p. 71). Are the data from a single study generalizable to 90 percent of American elementary classrooms? Further, how might one reconcile these data and the conclusion that basals control teachers' lessons with Durkin's (1983) observations of elementary teachers' consistent deviations from basal manual suggestions? "Although it is generally believed that a close match exists between basal manual suggestions and teacher behavior, this study identified a number of times when teachers did not adhere to the manual" (p. 743).

2. Are the examples from basal materials and the descriptions of their development which are used to argue for how they deskill teachers representative of current material or publishing practices?. For instance, in Broken Promises, Shannon (1989a, pp. 81-83) draws heavily from a 1983 basal series for an example of what he considers to be a deskilling lesson. Is that example representative of the types of lessons found in basal materials contemporary with the publication of Broken Promises or

* Shannon (1989c), reported a similar pattern of responses to these same five items (M = 3.9) for a different sample of 20 primary grade teachers.

those available today? Similarly, the examples used to argue that basal student textbooks contain highly adapted excerpts from children's literature (Goodman, 1988; Goodman et al., 1988) are taken from basals with mid 1980s copyrights. Though such practices are indefensible, do they persist in basal materials of the 1990s? It is my experience as a basal coauthor that they do not. Might not the stereotypes live on in spite of recent improvements in basal materials?

Shannon (1989a) argues that teachers have relinquished their control over literacy lessons to the basal materials and that it is "the publishing companies, the corporate enterprises and not the individual employees, which have absorbed the majority of teachers' skills" (p. 87). Further, Shannon argues that even basal reader authors are not in control of the development of basal materials:

> While it seems reasonable to believe that the authors write most of the goals and lessons included in the teachers' guidebook, according to Kenneth Goodman, former basal author (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, and Murphy, 1988) and George Graham, author of the only in-house study of basal publishing (Graham, 1978), nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, the authors act primarily as consultants, directing the efforts of others within a limited authority. (Shannon, 1989a, pp. 85-86).

Going to the original source Shannon cites in this excerpt, the Report Card on Basal Readers (Goodman et al., 1988), one finds the following:

> According to Graham the authors may not even be involved in any of the plan's [for a basal series] development:
>
> > On arriving at Gorman House [fictitious publisher name] for this study, the first question asked...was "How do you select your senior authors for the series?" The liaison laughed and said, "That is a very premature question, if you are really interested in what makes this business tick. Author selection is one of the least important parts of putting together a series."
>
> Again, the marketing department plays a crucial role in choosing the authorship team. As Graham puts it, "A company product is being shaped, not an individual's ideas being transformed into a book" (p. 95). Perhaps there was a time (before 1960?) when key authors had a major hand in developing a series. Their current role is a good deal less clearly defined. (Goodman et al., 1988, pp. 55).

This description of authors' roles, however, is at odds with other accounts of the basal publishing process. For instance, James Squire, a former vice president of a major educational

publisher, commented on the Report Card as follows: "The discussion of the development of basal reading programs is simplistic and misrepresents current practice of responsible publishers" (Squire, 1987, p. 2). Further, Squire reports that basal authors have had considerable input in the planning and development of the four major basal reading series in which he participated in a 20-year period and comments that "it seems to be peculiar indeed to engage professional and scholarly leaders on a project and not listen to their advice (Squire, 1987, pp. 3). John Pikulski (in press), a senior author on a current basal reading series, writes that "publishers of reading programs require considerable writing, planning, and other contributions from their authors. In the work I have done with one reading series publisher, the amount of required writing has been considerable and has spanned virtually all phases of development." Similarly, Cynthia Orrell (in press), an executive editor for a basal reader publisher, comments: "My experience is that authors commit a great deal of time and effort in all phases of the publishing cycle, from planning through development, and into marketing and sales."

So, what is the reality regarding basal publishing? Is it the view of Goodman et al. (1988), who drew heavily from the 1978 unpublished dissertation by Graham who "conducted in-depth, taped interviews with reading series personnel" of "two major publishers which he identified by fictitious names" through research methods referred to as "techniques of investigative reporting" (Goodman et al., 1988, p. 51). Is the information from two unspecified basal publishers in the 1970s representative of what happens in publishing houses today? Is Kenneth Goodman's personal experiences as an author on a basal reading series published in the 1970s the same as that which occurs in contemporary settings? Not so according to this select sample of publishers, authors, and editors of current basal materials. In short, is the information provided in recent critical reports of basal reading programs and their development compelling enough to conclude that such practices result in the deskilling of teachers?

3. Is there is a possible contradiction in the deskilling hypothesis, and might it not fall prey to its own argument? Unquestionably, basal reader critics believe in teachers' professional rights to determine the nature of their teaching and workplace, and they express strong confidence in teachers' ability to make intelligent, thoughtful judgments (Goodman et al., 1988; NCTE, 1988; Shannon, 1989d, 1990b). However, there is a side to the deskilling argument that suggests that teachers may not be quite clever enough to be discriminating consumers or users of instructional materials. For instance, is it suggested that teachers may fall victim to fancy advertising and packaging?

> The psychological, intellectual, and physical distance from the production of these materials [basals], coupled with the everyday confusion over the properties of commodities and

> the dazzle of advertisement, leaves school personnel with the illusion that the materials--not the labor of authors, artists, typesetters, and so on--can teach students to read. (Shannon, 1987, p. 314)

Are teachers slaves to basal materials? Is it hinted that they use them mindlessly and compliantly?

> Many teachers and administrators have come to believe that skipping a single page or exercise could harm pupils in some potentially permanent way. (Goodman et al., 1988, p. 1)

Is it insinuated that teachers truly subjugate themselves to the materials, moving over and letting the books run the reading program and ceasing to engage in professional development?

> With their reduced role, teachers see little incentive to improve their knowledge of instruction, of their students, and of educational goals as they at first acquiesce and then project the logic of technical control and reskilling. In this way, many teachers contribute unconsciously to their plight by accepting, and in fact perpetuating, the necessary subjectivity to maintain deskilling in the scientific management of reading instruction. (Shannon, 1990a, p. 154)

In short, is it contradictory to state on one hand that "teachers are knowledgeable and thoughtful in most endeavors of their lives" and on the other hand to acknowledge that "if they are not so [thoughtful and knowledgeable] in their schooling, then there must be something that prevents their reflection" (Shannon, 1990b, p. 624)? Do books brainwash teachers so they cannot reflect on their work and tie their hands so they cannot teach as they wish?

Finally, does the deskilling hypothesis fall prey to its own argument? A major tenet of the deskilling argument is that teachers reify reading instruction (Shannon, 1983, 1987, 1989a); that is, they view an abstraction (reading instruction) as a concrete object (basal materials), not as something they construct or do. However, doesn't the deskilling hypothesis also involve reification? Isn't an abstraction (teacher deskilling) also viewed in terms of the same concrete object (basal reading materials)? Therefore, doesn't the problem of teacher deskilling become defined in terms of the materials themselves, not in terms of the persons who may contribute to the problem?

Conclusions

I do not argue that there are no problems with American reading instruction, and I do not argue that there are no problems with basal reading programs. For instance, there ought not be adaptations of excerpts of children's literature; the literature in the student anthologies should provide students an avenue to the world of children's books; instruction should be

provided for fewer, authentic reading skills and strategies and only in contextualized ways; basal assessment techniques need to move from criterion-referenced evaluations of specific skills to holistic assessments that lead to teacher decision making and feed back into instruction; reading tasks need to be situated in the context of the entire range of language, language arts, and literature abilities; teacher guidebooks should not include scripted lessons, and it should be explicitly stated that the information they contain only represents instructional suggestions not teaching directives; workbook and skill sheets need to be reduced drastically, and those that remain must require students to respond in open-ended, reflective ways; and, most of all, basal authors, publishers, and marketing personnel need to prepare and present basal materials as one tool teachers, supervisors, and administrators can use to promote students' literacy, not as the total or only means to assist teachers in literacy instruction. It is goals like these that direct my efforts as a basal series coauthor to improve materials teachers can use to develop students' literacy abilities.

I also acknowledge that when education agencies or administrators mandate the use of basal materials in an inflexible fashion--which is especially prevalent in textbook adoption states (e.g., Apple, 1986, 1989)--teachers may find it difficult to exercise professional judgments. Thus, I endorse the recommendation that such adoption policies be disbanded (Farr & Tully, 1989) as well as most reasonable recommendations that enable school personnel to make their own judgments about literacy curriculum and instruction. For example, the recommendations in the NCTE (1988) "Call for Action" statement and the recommendations included in Chapter 9 of the Report Card on Basal Readers (Goodman et al., 1988) are sensible for the most part. I agree with Shannon (1989b, p. 188) when he stated that "I am not suggesting that teachers be given license to do whatever they wish during reading lessons, rather I suggest that they be given the freedom to construct reading programs...that meet the needs of their communities," although teachers need to be accountable to parents, school boards, administrators, and ultimately to their students for the decisions they make regarding their reading programs.

What I do take exception with is the suggestion that there is a simple cause and effect relationship between the materials of literacy instruction, basal readers specifically, and teachers' freedom, or lack thereof, to direct literacy lessons. Basal materials do not teach; teachers do. To suggest that books of any kind limit teachers' skills is demeaning and insulting to them.

There have been and remain conceptual and pedagogical limitations in basal reading materials; they never have been nor will they become the best or only way to assist teachers develop students' literacy abilities. Regarding teachers' roles and use

of various curricular materials and methodologies, I agree with Frank Smith (1973):

> The last thing that I want to do is imply that teachers have been doing everything wrong. Quite the reverse, my interest is in the fact that for so long, with so many children, teachers have been doing things that are obviously right....Any method, any approach to reading instruction, that worked before this chapter was written is obviously still going to work after it has been subjected to a critical review. Yesterday's methods might even work a little better if we get some insight into what really made them effective. Most teachers are eclectic--they do not act as brainless purveyors of predigested instruction. (p. 196)

In other words, teachers are independent, thoughtful persons quite capable of making professional judgments about their workplace and the nature of their work, basal readers included.

In the Preface to the Report Card on Basal Readers (Goodman et al., 1988), the authors state that one of the questions they sought to answer was "Why do teachers and students find themselves in a position of powerlessness during reading instruction?" (p. iv). To me the question should have been, "Do teachers and students find themselves in a position of powerlessness because of basal readers?" The former question seems to answer itself in the Report Card; the latter, in my estimation, has yet to be answered.

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